Chapter 10

Participation In Different Organisations And The Status Of The Women Migrants

Association whether to a political or social organisation has a positive impact on women’s enlightenment, social awareness and sense of autonomy. Women awaken to a desire to come out the purdah and the security of their home to the public arena (Gopalan 2001). Organisations provide an oft needed platform for women to share their grievances with others in a similar situation.

Travelling back in time to the nineteenth century, we see that the reform movement and spread of education among women were concerned more with improving their status in the family and strengthening the family as the basic unit of social organisation. Raising the status of women was perceived only as granting her the right to property, remarriage after widowhood, abolition of child marriage and right to education (Gopalan 2001). It is when Gandhiji called for women to come out and participate in the Independence movement and reconstruction of the nation, recognising them as persons with equal mental capacities, that the response was enormous (Gopalan 2001).

Munshi (2005) talks about women’s involvement during political disturbances during the first half of the seventies in West Bengal. The Bangladesh liberation struggle brought a huge influx of uprooted humanity, both Hindus and Muslims who needed food and shelter in India. Women political workers and activists played a big part in organising relief in refugee camps as well as solidarity actions with the liberation struggle in East Bengal.

After this a lot of water has flowed under the Ganges and women’s involvement in social and political organisations have proceeded in different degrees. However, Rai
(2011) notes that women in India continue to be grossly under-represented in legislative bodies both at national and state level and in political parties. Female representation in the lower house (Lok Sabha) of the Indian Parliament is still much lower than the world average of 20%, lower than the ‘critical mass’ required to introduce gender parity in political decision making and legislation.

The number of female representatives in legislative bodies in most of the States of India is also below 20%, reflecting a pan-Indian gender exclusion from electoral participation and quality representation. Rai (2011) draws attention to the need for reservation in legislative bodies and greater accommodation of women in decision making positions in political parties and in Government. Uma (2010) stresses on increased political participation of women, for better focussing on women’s status.

Various other authors have offered their views on political participation of women in India (Gothoskar et al.1983, Agarwal 1989, Sharma 1991, Afsharipour 1999, Galab and Rao 2003, Deshpande 2004, Priyadarshini 2011). Deshpande (2004) is of the opinion that women’s overwhelming support in the 2004 elections for the issues related to their public and political participation can definitely be regarded as a positive pointer towards the strengthening of women’s involvement in politics in future.

In general, Gothoskar et al. (1983) identify the struggle of women for greater control of their lives having taken place in four major forms.(i) women have organised autonomously (in mass movement, conscious raising groups, women’s centres etc) for control over their bodies as in case of physical abuse, for political rights like suffrage, against oppression of family (ii) fought through unions for improvement in their standards of life and conditions of work (iii) organised as housewives for social recognition and remuneration of work (iv) fought in more general social movements on issues affecting men and children also as for example for housing, against price rise etc.

Agarwal (1989) writes on women in poor rural household who are burdened with significant responsibility for family subsistence and are often the primary economic provider. But they are significantly constrained by limited resources and means and
disadvantages in the labour market - a constraint stemming not only from class position but also from gender. As a result poor peasant and tribal women have emerged in the forefront of many ecological initiatives which have developed into movements in several areas. Writing in this vein, Galab and Rao (2003) talk about poor women organised in groups contributing to poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment in Andhra Pradesh.

Sharma’s (1991) work on grassroots organizations and women empowerment examines the experience of women workers’ organizations, one of them being in the bidi industry.

Afsharipour’s (1999) examines the role of women’s non-governmental organisations using the example of recent developments in Bangladesh to argue that women’s non-governmental organisations have potential in filling enforcement gaps in the convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and increase government accountability and implementation.

Recently another scholar Priyadarshini (2011) emphasizes the role of non-governmental organizations and transnational feminist networks in facilitating the women proletarians’ movement against the dominant mode of production. The movement was more inclined towards “quiet” resistance and the article analyses the significance of the “quiet revolution”.

Political participation of women in India is still low, but as the previous discussion points out, there is need to focus on representation of women’s needs who are very often discriminated in ways more than one. Grassroot organizations and non-governmental organisations are doing their bit, but there is need to co-ordinate political participation by women and these organizations to bring about substantial changes in the situation of women in our country, both at home and outside.

It has been observed in chapter 7, in the survey areas of the present study, the women migrants from Bangladesh are primarily housewives in West Bengal, though almost all the women are employed in Orissa. Discussion in chapter 7 and 8 also reveal that very few of the women workers in both the States are able to fight for
their rights at work and as far as violence at home or outside is concerned. Though only a small number of the women were willing to talk about violence, this does not imply that the women are not exposed to it. Association to organizations in this regard, can go a long way in creating awareness and providing help in fighting for rights. In this context, the following section examines the participation of the women migrants in different organizations based on the survey data. This is likely to throw some light on the awareness of their rights and a platform to air their grievances.

Section 10.1: Participation in different organisations

The women migrants of West Bengal presented a somewhat dismal picture regarding their association to various organisations. Data which could be collected were meagre, and on the basis of whatever little information that could be gathered, is presented in Table 10.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisations</th>
<th>Lalbagh</th>
<th>Domkal</th>
<th>Kalyani</th>
<th>Tehatta</th>
<th>Kendrapara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected member of public body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey data

The table reveals that only 2.5% women in Lalbagh are active members of political parties and around 1% is elected member at the local government level. This calls
attention to Rai’s (2011) observations about women’s underrepresentation in India’s political arena.

There were no responses from the women migrants in Kalyani. Given the better education level of the women in Kalyani, West Bengal and Kendrapara, Orissa (where almost all the women are employed), one would expect better association to organisations and fight for rights in these two areas especially in Kendrapara. However, the women in Orissa exhibited a curious lack of interest and an element of hesitancy to be associated to any organisation. Agarwal (1989) and Sharma (1991) observe that women in poor rural household who are burdened with significant responsibility for family subsistence and are often the primary economic provider. But they are significantly constrained by limited resources and means and disadvantages in the labour market - a constraint stemming not only from class position but also from gender. As a result poor peasant and tribal women have emerged in the forefront of many ecological initiatives which have developed into movements in several areas. Sharma (1991) writing on grassroots organizations and women empowerment, examines the experience of women workers’ organizations, one of them being in the bidi industry.

In Chapter 7 on the work sphere of the women migrants in the survey area of the present study, a substantial percentage of the women who are employed, work in the bidi industry, but association or organizations is not much prevalent among the women migrant workers.

In Kalyani, 20% of the women migrants have occasional earnings from self employment activities like sewing or rice processing. With a little bit of organisation they could have a steady flow of earnings as Sundar (1983) prescribes, but despite their better literacy rate (61.42%) and secondary education (72.34%), the women appeared disinterested towards such pursuits.

On the other hand, women in Tehatta are associated to political parties (8.34%) as well as social organisations (8.34%). 50% belong to the Rs 9000-12000 income category and 15% to the highest income bracket (Rs 15000 plus). These findings
reiterate Mercer’s (2002) view on the representation of better-off and higher-status women in women’s organisations.

Participation in organisations, political or social, is low in the survey areas, even in the areas of Kalyani, West Bengal and Kendrapara, Orissa, where education levels are better. Participation is highest among the women migrants in Tehatta where income levels are comparatively higher. The following chapter now takes a look at the involvement of the women migrants in the various decisions related to their households.